

Case Study

South Somerset Works drives organisation-wide efficiency through empowering employees

~ how Consilium's TotalMobile solution is helping housing maintenance staff work on the move, improve efficiency and complete more jobs per week per operative ~

Introduction

South Somerset Works (SSW) is the contracting arm of South Somerset Homes Ltd. The organisation maintains over 14,500 properties, which are a mixture of properties owned by South Somerset Homes and properties owned by external clients. The organisation has over 268 employees, 58 of whom are maintenance staff and work on the road completing various repair and review work onsite at the properties. SSW carries out a variety of work at the properties including cyclical servicing, planned maintenance and horticultural maintenance.

The challenge

SSW undertook a strategic IT review to investigate where efficiencies in working practices could be achieved. By streamlining the processes already in place through the use of new technology, the organisation had key objectives at a corporate and employee level. The company wanted to be able to reduce the level of admin each employee completed each day, remove any bottlenecks and improve the day-to-day experience for its workforce. By improving productivity at the employee level, the organisation would have additional time and resource to focus on expanding the amount of properties in its management portfolio.

From an IT perspective, SSW's incumbent solution was not able to integrate job management effectively and was not flexible enough to incorporate new compliance requirements. The time had come to upgrade the in-house software with a more robust solution that would enable the organisation to embrace new working strategies. TASK Contractor from Consilium was implemented and greatly improved the financial and operational management of SSW.

In order to receive their daily workload and also update SSW's maintenance records, the operatives were forced to return to the depot at head office at least once a day. This not only limited the number of jobs an employee could complete per day, but also increased the amount of petrol being used to keep returning to the office.

The solution

SSW worked with Consilium to implement its TotalMobile solution in a trial phase with some of its mobile maintenance staff. TotalMobile works on a range of mobile devices operating on Microsoft Windows-based technology. The devices enable users to receive or send information directly to central servers, removing the need for staff to be on a fixed network to get corporate information.

Consilium worked with SSW to configure a solution using PDA devices. This replaced an expensive in-van radio system, which had previously been installed for staff to communicate when on the road. The devices were selected as they

offered the best solution for accessing paperwork and updating information on the move.

The solution also incorporates stock management functionality, linking front-line operations to the organisations stores depot. Once a job is logged and completed, information about materials used is captured from the completed electronic form and transmitted to stores. Replacement supplies are then picked so that the van can be replenished once it returns to base. The automation of impress stock procedures enables SSW to keep a much tighter control of spending on resources, by minimising waste.

Training and feedback from employees were crucial elements to the trial, before any kind of rollout. Any mobile technology has to be understood and accepted by users before a project goes live, otherwise the project quickly fails. Consilium's mobile team worked closely with the triallists to make sure the solution matched the procedures the operatives were used to executing, right down to the terminology used in SSW. Prior to the trial, the PDAs were distributed to the staff, who were encouraged to use the phone facility, getting them used to the devices before the software was uploaded. When the trial started, Consilium's mobile team demonstrated clearly how the solution fitted into the daily itinerary and actively implemented improvements suggested by the operatives.

“User feedback was a critical factor in our testing,” said Rob Barker, finance manager, South Somerset Works. “Consilium advised that any mobile strategy had to be accepted by the employees, not simply thrust upon them with no warning. All the feedback was incorporated into the completed solution to make sure staff understood that their opinions were very much part of the process.”

The solution went live in December 2006 with two groups of mobile staff and two back-office staff trained on the system as super users. The solution went live across its 58-strong maintenance team in April 2007. Back-office personnel have been trained up to support the day-to-day use of the technology enabling them to field IT support queries from the maintenance teams. The back office staff support the solution as a part of their duties and are not dedicated to the project.

The benefits

The TotalMobile solution has empowered employees on the road by giving them the power to update information remotely. Admin has been reduced with operatives collecting and completing job information on the move. The employees now using the system are each able to complete many more tasks per week. Efficiency levels already up by 10% are set to increase by an additional 5% over the next 12 months as further modules are rolled out. SSW will move to roll out the solution to the remainder of the maintenance staff over the coming months, with the aim of further improving productivity.

Environmentally, the company is saving approximately 20,000 miles a year spent on journeys to and from the head office. The electronic capture of information has also reduced the amount of paper and printing carried out on a daily basis by the organisation.

“Moving to a mobile solution not only improves our efficiency as an organisation, but gives our employees far more flexibility,” continued Barker. “Our maintenance staff can now fully embrace a mobile working option, which improves their work/life balance on a daily basis and gets rid of the constant to-ing and fro-ing between home, the properties and HQ, which was forcing them to spend unnecessary time on the road. Now the staff can give their full attention to the jobs that need to be completed onsite.”

“The introduction of what our maintenance staff consider to be hi-tech devices has helped them to raise their game significantly,” continued Barker.

“Traditionally the last person in the business normally to benefit by new technologies, the tables have been turned. The introduction of mobile devices has in fact helped to create a greater sense of job ownership amongst the operatives.”

“By improving our employees’ daily duties, SSW becomes more flexible and productive as an organisation. We have more time to deploy staff across the

property portfolio. As we increase productivity, we can look to take on further tenders across the region and increase the number of properties we manage.”

The future

Building on the initial success of the implementation, South Somerset Works is now currently looking at how else the technology can be used across the organisation. Initial plans are to have all empty properties, scheduled, specified and allocated by the surveyors direct to maintenance teams. In addition, the management team is looking at introducing software to enable it to write its own electronic forms, with the support of Consilium. This will enable SSW to introduce a means for all field-based personnel to report any additional work needed they can't address when out at properties. These include reporting on the condition of gardens, any difficulties encountered and possible dangers to other operatives.

Words - 1189